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Right-wing populism in Europe: politics and discourse

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BOOK REVIEW

RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE: POLITICS AND DISCOURSE

Edited by Ruth Wodak, Majid KhosraviNik and Brigitte Mral, 2013

London and New York, Bloomsbury

334 pp., ISBN-10: 1780932456 (pbk £19.99)

In an interview with *The New York Times*, the then Prime Minister of Italy Enrico Letta warned against the rise of populism in Europe and stated that ‘the fight against populism [...] is a mission today in Italy and in the other countries’ (Yardley, 2013). In the same interview, Mr Letta connoted populism in Europe as mostly ‘anti-European’ and expressed his worry that the forthcoming European elections could leave us with ‘The most “anti-European” European Parliament ever’ (Yardley, 2013). Mr Letta had his own good reasons to worry about populism; indeed, populist organisations such as Beppe Grillo’s Five Stars Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle) were the most vocal enemies of his coalition government. The unexpected electoral success of the former comedian’s movement – which gathered around eight million votes (25% of the total votes) at the 2013 Italian general elections (Maggini, 2013, p. 69) – has been a shocking event not only for Italian politicians and political commentators, but also for the rest of the European Establishment. The electoral campaign that resulted in such a surprising success focused mostly on anti-establishment and anti-European rhetoric, with Europe portrayed as the centre of irradiation of austerity politics, coupled with a very aggressive verbal style and a complete and blind cult of Grillo’s persona (for more on the movement and its characteristics, see Biorcio & Natale, 2013; Bordinon & Ceccarini, 2013). The results of the last European Elections have shown that Letta’s forecasts were right, but in the meantime his successor at the head of the Italian government, Matteo Renzi, seems to have managed to tame the populist movement at least at the national level. Indeed, the Five Stars Movement has only won 21% of national ballots at the elections for the European Parliament, which is a very modest result if compared with the impressive 41% that Renzi won for the Italian Democratic Party. Despite the decrease in its share of votes, though, the movement is still in a position to influence both Italian and European politics, especially after the coalition it has recently formed with its British counterpart, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), led by Nigel Farage.

Right-wing populism in Europe is thus a very timely contribution to the debate about populist responses to the crisis of liberal democracies vis-à-vis the political, social and economic developments over the last 20 years of European history. The problem is addressed through a genuinely multidisciplinary approach. Contributions come from diverse scholarly research fields such as Political Science, Political Sociology, History, Discourse Analysis and Media Studies, but most importantly, they also come from pivotal non-academic practices, such as that of journalism and activism.

The book is divided into four sections with the first one dedicated to the exploration of the different theories and approaches that can be used to understand right-wing populism. The section addresses the socio-economic reasons for its development, highlighting the failure of mainstream parties in tackling the economic crisis. The Journalist Magnus Marsdal describes the main characteristics of contemporary populism, while Anton Pelinka's chapter looks at the phenomenon through the lens of political science – and in its contemporary Western European version, mostly characterised by Islamophobic sentiments which are also characterised in Aristotle Kallis and Hans-Georg Betz's contributions. The first section also accounts for the ways in which right-wing populist parties have built their success through the use of different semiotic modes. The reference to the use of semiotic resources can be found in more than one chapter, but it is the main focus of a specialist in the field, Ruth Wodak, in her chapter on the Hiderization of Europe. The final chapter, by activist Heidi Beirich, gives a frightening account of the ideological and personal ties between the racist movements in Europe and the ones in the USA.

The rest of the volume is organised according to what seems to be a merely geographical criterion – if one only looks at the titles of the sections – but it is in fact a geopolitical constellation: grouping the countries according to their more or less common sociopolitical characteristics and history.

Section 2 focuses on Western Europe. The case studies presented in the section describe the dynamics of right-wing populism in long-standing member countries of the European Union. For the UK, an incursion on the discourse of the English Defence League (EDL) is provided by John Richardson who, by focusing on internal documents, sheds a much-needed insight on the ideology shared by the militants of the group. The background for EDL's ideology is provided in Solomo's chapter with a general outlook on racist movements and Labour's reactions to the rise of racist discourse. In the case study on Austria, the evolution of FPÖ's public discourse, from Heider's anti-immigration rhetoric to the most recent openly Islamophobic discourse, is described by Michał Krzyżanowski, while Schellenberg's contribution on Germany shows how the mainstreaming of racist discourse can get as far as the ranks of the Social Democratic party. Ruzza and Balbo present the Italian situation through the description of the different versions of populism championed by Silvio Berlusconi and Umberto Bossi. Brigitte Beauzamy explains the rise of the Front National (FN) in France by looking at politics through a market metaphor where citizens are on the demand side and politicians are suppliers of answers. Both sides are taken into consideration also in the chapter that follows, on Holland, but this time the problem is addressed by Oudenampsen through a Gramscian lens, by looking at the public debate on the rise of right-wing ideas in the country. Finally, Benjamin de Cleen describes the political situation in Belgium by looking at the aspects of progressive resistance to right-wing discourse.

Section 3 is simply called Central and Eastern Europe, but the case studies shed a much-needed light on the peculiarities of right-wing populism in post-Soviet societies, which in extreme synthesis seems to be characterised by mostly anti-Russian and anti-Semitic sentiments. The first chapter in the section is on Hungary where the rise of the Jobbik party is partially explained by András Kovács with the timidity of the post-Soviet left. Estonia and Latvia are then explored through an enlightening comparative approach

provided by Auers and Kasekamp. Finally, Anton Shekhovtsov's chapter on Ukraine's Svoboda party contributes to a better understanding of the recent political turmoil in the country.

Section 4 focuses on the Scandinavian context and shows that the advanced and well-run welfare states of northern Europe are not exempt from right-wing populism. This section abounds in comparative studies, with the first one provided by Fryklund, who contributes a particularly useful introduction to this somehow exotic region of Europe. Other comparative studies deal with evidence coming mostly from Denmark and Sweden – as in Nohrstedt's communication-studies analysis on the *Muhammad cartoons saga*, and in Boréus's chapter on anti-immigration discourse. The peculiarity of the Swedish case is explored in Oja and Mral's contribution, where they describe the journalistic debate on the appropriateness of giving space to right-wing parties' propaganda on their pages. Interestingly, this section and the book are closed by the contribution of a journalist, Christoph Andersson, who describes his strategies for dealing with right-wing populist parties and groups.

The contributions in each of the last three sections cover different fields, and sometimes clarify theoretical, discipline-specific, debates. Many themes – such as the articulation of insiders and outsiders in the discourse of populist parties; the idea of threat; the relationship with historical antecedents such as National Socialism and Fascism; the role of charismatic leaders and that of the mass media – recur in the 22 chapters of the volume. Unfortunately, a general picture is only attainable through the effort of the reader, who is required to make comparisons and draw conclusions while also making sense of the different taxonomies linked to the academic discourse communities represented in the volume. Nonetheless, the effort is worth making.

The editors have done a fantastic job in organising the chapters, and while reading the book (as a graduate in political sciences, discourse analyst, journalist and activist), I had the general and surprising sensation that any theoretical or analytical objection I could possibly raise to one chapter would then be covered in the next one or two. Any aspect of contemporary complex societies that I thought was disregarded in one chapter was addressed in the following contribution.

In their introduction, the editors set a very difficult goal for themselves and their contributors: they wish to 'explain why' this transformation is happening. Unfortunately, they do not give the reader a solid and unequivocal answer. Instead, they provide space and inspiration for many other inquiries, and they help to articulate good, informed questions for others to continue exploring this aspect of contemporary societies.

The volume is suitable for discourse analysts who wish to acquaint themselves with how scholars address the non-semiotic aspect of this phenomenon. Academics coming from different traditions will find the evidence of the role of semiosis in social phenomena quite convincing, as well as the demonstration of how these phenomena can be explained through a thorough analysis of the semiotic resources in use. Hopefully, the volume will also reach committed journalists who, thanks to the abundance of insights into the development of right-wing populism, will become better prepared to resist the drive towards sensationalist news covering. Finally, the choice of releasing the material under a creative commons licence makes the book a particularly activist-friendly piece of scholarly work.

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